

POINT OF VIEW

In each issue of *SPIRAL*, we will present a statement (along with a series of related questions) which explores essential, often controversial, issues involving the contemporary avant-garde cinema. We solicit interested readers to submit written responses to the statements in an effort to establish an ongoing and international dialogue on these issues. We will endeavor to print as many responses as possible; however, due to space limitations, we request that responses be kept to 1000 words or less. These statements are, admittedly, provocative and opinionated; however, it is not our intention that every reader agree with the point of view expressed in the statements; on the contrary, we look forward to a wide range of arguments and responses — pro and con. The issues which will be discussed are, after all, quite complex and certain to evoke a diversity of opinion. In this sense, the statements are a means to establish a significant interchange of ideas on topics of concern to many people involved with avant-garde cinema.

STATEMENT: In a sociopolitical context, the concept that art can change society is beyond the scope

Warren Sonbert

Now it is quite possible to hide behind being a Gayist, a Feminist or a Marxist and still be a lousy artist. Art is tied to Politics in absolutely no way whatsoever, or rather Art can be used by Politics, but Politics cannot be used by Art. There is no difference

of most avant-garde filmmakers, whose primary concerns are formal and aesthetic.

In responding to this statement, you may wish to address several or all of the following questions:

- 1) Is it possible to synthesize avant-garde film with a progressive political consciousness?
- 2) Despite the fact that the avant-garde filmmaker attempts to challenge traditional modes of perception and works within a radical art form which opposes the dominant culture, can this approach be viewed as a "political" stance even if the artist has limited political awareness or limited understanding of the principles underlying social change?
- 3) Does the specific form in which a film takes — representational or non-representational, abstract or narrative, etc. — have any relationship to its being politically progressive or reactionary?
- 4) How has the institutionalization of avant-garde film, and the development of an economic support structure heavily reliant on government funding, affected filmmakers' ability to challenge the establishment?

in the tools of hagiography of Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and Vertov's *Three Songs for Lenin*. In both, demagogues and tyrants are celebrated with Eisenstein's knee-jerking technique of dialectical montage — a curse of the cinema if there ever was

one. Show a good guy and cut to any honorific image, or replace the villain of the moment with a pejorative image, and there you have the editing technique of the unfortunately vast majority of montage films. Such easy marks will not survive close readings. To point the finger or celebrate without qualification is propaganda, not even "Politics," certainly not Art. To try to convert to your point of view, to call into question the so-called political consciousness of others, is a self-aggrandizing limited imposition. Stendhal: "Any moral intention, that is to say any self-interested intention of the artist's, kills the work of art." What do Elliott Carter's Third St. Quartet or Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie" have to do with Politics? Art is Politics only in the sense of expanding horizons, broadening sensibilities, undermining the codes, being presented with multiple, often conflicting, points of view and the breakdown of rigidity. Art is presenting a given and then qualifying that statement, and then following that qualification with yet another objectivity. Art is destructive, yes, criminal acts to disrupt unquestioned codes, agreed, but *not* an act of Enlistment. Politics is the last refuge of the non-artist. Godard, a not very interesting filmmaker when he started out, another one of those second generation graverobbers, at least escaped the empty, facile propaganda of *Weekend*, that Tati cum Keaton ripoff, in his early work. In his second feature, *Le Petit Soldat*, he at least (and now we are speaking on the lowest narrative level) had the modicum of intelligence to blame both sides, the terrorists and the establishment, for deploying means of torture. He didn't take sides and say "We're the good guys and you're the bad guys" the way he later did. Anything that smacks of such easy solutions is beyond the pale of being excepted as Art. Stravinsky's *Les Noces* and not Shostakovich's *Leningrad*

Symphony is the truly revolutionary work, though the former as text celebrates 19th century Russia, while the latter extols the new Soviet machinery.

And while we're on the dubious subject, I'd like to posit that Soviet Cinema is Fascistic and Totalitarian, that the mind control utilized, unquestioning and predigested reserved-up slop, is the most brazen example of repressive imagery in the history of Cinema. Those holy of holies in academic circles and in the vulgar lobotomized New Left texts, Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, Pudovkin's *Mother*, Dovzhenko's *Earth*, Kozintsev's *The New Babylon*, are all stultifying examples of smug, complacent and oppressive cinema. From the word go, from the first images, the view is pushed that the peasants are ipso facto great solely due to their poverty, while the bourgeoisie is evil because they're in the position of power. And that's the attitude for the next two hours. No shades, no gray, no ambiguity, no questioning. Ironically enough Douglas Sirk during the 30's at UFA managed to put out quite a few works of film art (*Schlussakkord*, *Zu Neuen Ufern*, *La Habanera*) with Nazi money and backing. A cheating of expectations is always much more disturbing, an essential element of Art, than is a diatribe, a predisposed, unvarying point of view.

The only thing that changes society is Art, that accounts for new ways of seeing, of hearing, of experiencing. Politics is just another pat on the back, a corrupting influence and a plea for power. Eisensteinian dialectical montage is reactionary; it wants to impose, to corrupt. There's no breathing space, no transcendence in Soviet cinema. Perhaps only Vertov in *The Man with a Movie Camera* managed to escape this mental rack with some images and editing riffs of poetry, of the issue that a given sight or series could be read in more than just one Procrustean given.

Meanwhile Totalitarianism is still with us as some mindless "journalists" try to persuade us of the viability of New Cuban Cinema while that nation blithely incarcerates its homosexual population to concentration camps, with the same thoroughness and inhumanity as the National Socialists. Ezra Pound and Richard Wagner had, given today's "stan-

dards," a rather low political consciousness of a reactionary nature — yet they produced revolutionary works that changed the course of their art forms. And I'm not buying into Social Realism because it's facile pabulum — only fit for the smug and unquestioning, those who yearn to be King of the Mountain for awhile.

Warren Sonbert

San Francisco, California

Pola Rapaport

Avant-garde filmmakers are in a unique position to be politically honest, communicative, and straightforward, simply because of the economics of filmmaking. They have far more political freedom than commercially oriented filmmakers.

Making movies is so expensive that there are very few films made which are not the victims of their own costs. So much money is at stake that most producers insist that their products be inoffensive to the greatest possible number of viewers. Of course, this usually precludes much of a political consciousness, much less a progressive one.

I have always believed the economic (and hence political) freedom of self-supported avant-garde filmmakers to be a great luxury and a shame to waste. Keeping artifice and manipulation to a minimum and expenses down are most noble goals when making films.

An interesting paradox has arisen in the field of political, personal, and independent films. Due to the funding options and screening possibilities of politi-

cally oriented films, most films which attempt to be politically progressive are aesthetically retrograde. To how many stiflingly boring and conventional documentaries on any number of issues has the reader of this statement been subjected, while hoping to view a politically oriented film? Even if one refuses to walk out on such a work, its message is dulled and one's feeling for it tainted with negativity. What does that say for opening up people's minds to new ideas? To my mind, it says that the process is being insidiously frustrated.

Any documentarian expecting to get his or her work shown on public television — even if the work has been begun with good intentions — must compromise completely any alternatives in style that may have been contemplated. Stylistic deviation is simply not accepted. Revolutionary works of art (in terms of social message or style) are not within the realm of government and corporate funded public television, nor are they smiled upon by government sources which provide production funds.